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Sent: Monday, March 06, 2006 7:48 AM
To: MLPACComments@resources.ca.gov
Subject: MLPACComments: Monterey Breakwater Hooking Incidents

The Monterey Breakwater dive site is the most popular, heavily used dive site on the West coast of the United States. The Breakwater should be included in a State Marine Reserve that extends from the Breakwater to Lovers Point, as proposed in Package 2 (and unlike Package S). In addition to exemplifying the conservation and recreational goals of the Marine Life Protection Act, a reserve at the Breakwater also removes a serious danger to divers being hooked by fishermen. In this small very heavily dived area, allowing fishing on and adjacent the Breakwater is equivalent to allowing hunters to shoot pigeons in an urban park. The incidence of hooking incidents is so frequent that the joke is that "Breakwater fishermen are catching more divers than fish."

On average, over a study period from January to September of 2005, reported incidents of fishermen hooking divers occurred once every 19 days - with the actual number undoubtedly exceeded the report incidents. Subsequent studies by Berkley White, photographing the Breakwater throughout several days at automatic preset intervals of several minutes, showed that on a typical September weekend, divers in the water at the Breakwater outnumbered Breakwater fishermen by ratios of 20 - 50 to one.

Below please find a detailed report hooking incidents at the Breakwater for the study period January to September 2005.

BREAKWATER HOOKING AND ENTANGLEMENT INCIDENTS IN 2005, JANUARY TO SEPTEMBER

Below are hooking incidents compiled by reviewing past e-mails on the diver e-mail list `ba_diving`, and asking that group of approximately 450 divers if they knew of additional incidents. One incident was reported to an MLPA-CCRSg diver rep at a dive club meeting, with a follow-up confirming e-mail.

The hooking and entanglement incidents reported this year between Jan 1 - Sept 24, 2005, are listed below:

Jan 30 (1 diver, entangled by line, caught twice on same dive)

Feb 1 (1 diver hooked)

Feb 6 (same diver hooked twice in same day)

Feb 20 (1 diver hooked)

May 19 (2 divers hooked)

June 12 (1 diver hooked)

July 23 (4 divers hooked)

Sept 24 (1 diver hooked)

14 incidents over 38 weeks were reported on `ba_diving`, making the reported hooking/entanglement rate one incident every 19 days on average. The actual incident rate is probably much higher, since many incidents are not reported on `ba_diving`.

Report details follow, in the divers' own words. Divers' names have been omitted, as promised in our request for reports.

Incident Date: Sun Jan 30, 2005

Report Date: Mon Jan 31, 2005

Monastery looked like a little more trouble than it was worth so we headed back to good ol' breakwater. Quite a few dive teams, getting in and out at around 4pm. Kicked out to about the gate which I'm now convinced should be closed like it used to be. I'm not sure why but since last year, I guess around the time they put in that new black gate, it seems like every time I go there the gate is it has remained open during all hours of the day and night. This never concerned me up until yesterday. I wasn't paying too much attention to the wide eyed sight see'ers above us on the way out until I turned over, and prepared to go down. That's when I noticed the massive line up of fisher people lined all the way down past the gate and the maze of fishing line we'd have to weave through.

How ridiculous. Never have I had to deal w/ that before. Crap. Pure crap. Lines and hooks dangling all over the place. I got caught up twice, luckily in some slack of the line and the guy didn't notice and try to reel me in. Broke out the Riffe Knife and put an end to those. Weighted lines w/ double hooks trailing past us like little fish. Dangerous. Down right dangerous. 'They', whoever 'they' are, should not let 'them' the fisher people past the gate. Just not safe. ...[describes other aspects of dive] ...Great dive w/ the exception of the fishing lines. Anyone know how we can get the fisher people back behind the fence again?

Report Date: Tue Feb 1, 2005

I did get hooked last week at the Breakwater. On the way out, I swung wide to avoid the fishermen, but I tend to get lost in the rocks with my macro lens on the way back.... suddenly, it was very hard to swim. I thought to myself, 'Man! This current is TERRIBLE!'. Then I noticed that the kelp next to me was standing straight up. I looked around, and saw the line. I swam, he pulled. I swam harder, he pulled harder. Then pop, and off I went, the one that got away. Got back to my truck with a hook in my BC with a hunk of squid attached. Luckily it didn't get the bladder... or my drysuit.

Incident Date: Sun Feb 6, 2005

My wife, K., asked me to send the info on her getting hooked.

She was hooked twice, on her two final checkout dives for her basic certification. So once in the morning and once in the afternoon. This happened on superbowl Sunday, which was late Jan. or early Feb. 2005 (I don't remember the exact date).

The first time she didn't see all the fishing lines. There were lot's both times. She got hooked on her finger. It didn't go in too deep, so we were able to pull it out without too much trouble. But it did cut her. She was a bit traumatized by it, I think mainly because of being nervous in her first dives.

The second time she saw the fishing lines and was trying to avoid them, but couldn't. She got hooked somewhere on her arm. This time she and the instructor had to surface and work for a while to get it out. Again, not too deep of a cut, but did break the skin.

Incident and Report Date: Sunday Feb 20, 2005

Quite an interesting day at the Breakwater. First dive with R. from work. Pretty good considering it's his 2nd dive in a BP&W and only a couple of dive Post OW/AOW... I think I've succeeded in turning him over to the dark side (get the koolaid ready).

Considering what happened to us today I'm glad he's taking DIR to heart.

Dive 1 Plan was to get comfy diving the BP&W then a mellow dive along the wall and then back...during the dive my buddy spotted a rockfish with a hook hanging out of it's mouth (little did I know this was an omen of things to come, read on) On the way back I popped a smb and ascended. At about 20ft he was a bit excited and pointing behind me as I look down and between my legs I see a vertical string of small red and yellow dots suspended in the water hmmm.. never seen fish like that before... and before I could figure it out he grabs it and tried to move it away. It turns out "It" was a smelt jig with about 6 small hooks bouncing up and down between my legs.

Right about then a light goes off in my head and I mouth in my reg "WTF" and see that now Rob's caught on one of the hooks as the guy on the other end figured he had something on the line (Rob quickly motions for a knife (he didn't have one since he was using my spare that didn't have one) I quickly grab the line in one hand and my knife and sever the line before more harm is done. Needless to say during this we ended up floating up past our planned 15/10 ft stop...

not out of control but more to see who would own up. We surface and scanned around and saw one gentleman looking away and re rigging his pole. We yell out if anyone has lost a hook to see if anyone would fess up but no one would... The disturbing fact is that I deployed a SMB and was ascending from 35 then at 20 Rob found the line between my legs. But since I wasn't back kicking how did that line get there? Hmmm Let's see some one see's a marker float up and says darn Divers then casts at it? I don't want to think of it but boy was I pissed, we just kinda joked about it afterwards but it could have been a lot worse. Thank God for alert buddies

Dive 2 Slow kicking around the sand toward the middle then back toward the wall... Staying well away from the wall... but still almost running into some line in 20ish feet somewhere near the used to be locked gate.

Incident Date: Friday May 13, 2005

There were at least two incidents of fisherman accidentally hooking divers at the Coast-guard Breakwater in Monterey on Friday the 13th.

One of the REEF fish surveyors was hooked Friday night on a night dive at the Breakwater - the hook caught the leg of her dry suit and tore it. It was during the surface swim out to the site of the survey. Fortunately, the hook did not pierce her leg, and her buddies were able to extract the hook, but the suit was flooded, ending her dive. The hooked diver had come out to Monterey from Florida to participate in the REEF survey, and to experience the kelp forests she'd heard so much about. The drysuit was a brand new DUI and she was unable to get it repaired before the 630 am departure of the charter boat on Saturday morning. So she missed the final day of the survey, ending her visit to Monterey on a disappointing note.

We also learned that earlier in the day on Friday, M. [an experienced diver and instructor], was hooked in his BCD while diving at the Breakwater. He and his buddy had just spent 10-15 minutes clearing out discarded fishing line from the wall when he became ensnared. Luckily the air bladder of his BCD was not punctured, and his alert buddy was able to extract the hook. M. said that if he had been alone, the only thing he could have done was to remove the BCD underwater to reach the hook - he couldn't reach the line or the hook otherwise.

Incident Date: Sunday June 12, 2005

I have on numerous occasions had to untangle line so that students would not be "caught" by the unthinking fisherman lined up on the wall. On June 12th I was snagged as I was picking up what I thought was loose fishing line (which I'd been doing the entire dive without anyone attached). This time, however, by the time I thought I had it all wrapped up, there turned out to be a fisherman at the other end. Luckily, I was able to free myself before a very large 3/4" + hook went through my thumb. (Didn't know we had any sharks out there as I wasn't sure what this person would be fishing for with that size of hook).

Incident Date: Saturday July 23, 2005

As far as for what happened to us, we were out on a night dive (part of an advanced class) with about 7 students and 3 staff members. We always stay well away from the wall because of the fisherman. So going out was not a problem, it was the return that ended up very bad. When putting students into the water for their first night dive, we have to make sure it is as uneventful as possible so their anxiety level doesn't go any higher than it already is, so as we surfaced all of a sudden the fishing lines came right at us. If it hadn't been for my divemasters' quick reaction of cutting the lines, we would have been hooked. As it was, we ended up with the hooks embedded in our hoses, four of us. When we got back up top and got our gear off, we walked down to the showers to shower off our dry suits as we normally did and we debriefed the dive thinking it was just bad luck that we ended up right where all the lines were until we witnessed several fisherman standing on the wall laughing about how they almost got them (the divers). My assistant approached them and said he didn't think their little diver hooking game was a very good one that someone could get hurt or they could hook someone and they just laughed back and said, "its not like we hooked them". These fisherman are always at the wall on the weekend, drinking alcohol and making a sport of trying to hook us, all we can do is try and gauge where the turn is and surface well before we get near them.

On other occasions, while out diving the wall during the day, I had to stop my dive and go to the aid of a diver that had gotten tangled in some fishing line that they didn't see. This fishing line is all over the wall. I try as hard as I can to pick up as much of the line as I see, but there is a lot. I have also seen several of the sea lions with these small hooks embedded in their skin or mouths.

I'm not sure what the answer is, but I just wish that the fisherman would not be allowed to fish off Breakwater with all the divers that are in the water. I know there are a lot of other piers they could fish off of.

Incident Date: Saturday Sept 24, 2005

I was saying to myself "Nope, hasn't happened to me for a long time", but this afternoon (9/24, Saturday, at approximately 3PM) I was doing an AOW course for a moderately experienced (80 dives in tropical water) diver. We were in about 30 feet of water near the elbow in the Breakwater when I noticed that he had stopped moving forward. I turned around and noticed that he had a double baited line (i.e. two hooks) stretched taut around his tank valve. Naturally I whipped out my knife and with two swipes I cut the line (it had grabbed him on both sides of his BCD near his tank valve). We continued to swim in and I noticed that he was dragging two "more" hooks and a lead sinker from the bottom of his tanks. I freed him from the entanglement and we ended the dive with no further issues.

Conclusion

While many hooking and entanglement incidents were reported from previous years, the incident rate picked up when the outer portion of the Breakwater was re-opened in 2004. This area was closed for several years after Sept 11, 2001, for homeland security reasons, to prevent close access to the Coast Guard cutter moored there. Hooking incidents described in previous years included divers' being hooked in all parts of the body and gear, including masks, hands and between the legs.

So far, to the best of this writer's knowledge, serious injury or death has not been caused by a hooking or entanglement at the Breakwater, although hook puncture wounds are relatively common. The primary danger to divers is panicking when hooked and bolting to the surface, potentially resulting in a serious or fatal lung expansion injury.

Another danger is a hooking or entanglement that a diver cannot free themselves from, after separation from their buddy who does not notice their absence in time, resulting in drowning after expending their air reserve.

Hooking and entanglement of divers by fishermen off the Breakwater Pier appears to be an ongoing public safety issue. Recent weekend counts of divers and fishermen at the Breakwater show that divers greatly outnumber fisherman by ratios that vary from 20 - 50 divers to one fisherman. Although diving at the Breakwater is much more popular than fishing, a handful of fishermen endanger many divers. This fishing activity should shift to the nearby Wharfs I and II, where diving is prohibited except by special permit. In addition to the very strong conservation, research and recreational reasons to include the Breakwater in a State Marine Reserve extending from the Breakwater to Lovers Point, such a reserve would also protect divers from the danger posed by fishermen hooking divers in this very heavily-used recreational area - a reasonable regulation equivalent to prohibiting hunting in a park alongside a heavily used hiking trail.

Respectfully submitted,

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